

VARIOUS

HOODED DETECTIVE,
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Hooded Detective, Volume III No. 2, January, 1942

THE WHISPERING EYE

A BRAND NEW BLACK HOOD NOVEL by G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Hunted by the police ... framed for robbery and murder by the EYE, master fiend and vicious ruler of the underworld ... loathed by Barbara Sutton, the girl who loves him ... The BLACK HOOD had to face the blazing purgatory of this murder master's guns to win back Barbara's love and clear himself of the framed charges.

CHAPTER I

Rob And Kill

That night, the sounds that came from the metal stamping plant of Weedham Industries, Incorporated, might have been prophetic of the immediate and ugly future, for they were like the rattle of machine guns. But Joseph, keeper of the south gate, was blissfully ignorant of a Thompson gun and its deadly chatter, so that he drew no such comparison. His only worry at the time lay in the dark sky above and the blue-white stabs of lightning that promised an electrical storm.

He hated storms. Probably he hated the idea of being murdered, or would have if it ever occurred to him. But then he didn't know that he was going to be murdered, and he did know it was going to storm. The thunder was the tocsin of the storm, but those who came to rob and kill moved unheralded in swift silence.

The night shift had clocked in over an hour ago, and there should be no passing through the gate for at least six hours. Joseph tilted his chair back against the steel fence and kindled his cob pipe. The air was hot and still so that blobs of pipe smoke clung like earth-bound ghosts about him. In spite of the impending storm, Joseph was happy. In his mind was a kindly thought for William "Old Bill" Weedham, principal owner of Weedham Industries. That was because of the bonus Joseph was anticipating.

Within the next twenty-four hours, Joseph knew, seventy-five thousand dollars would be distributed in cash bonuses to the employees of the metal stamping division. Joseph had mentally spent his tiny fraction of the money a dozen times or more. He did a lot of dreaming, Joseph did. But about pleasant things. He had never dreamed of those who rob and kill.

A low slung maroon roadster came down the street and nosed into the mouth of the tarvia drive at Joseph's gate. Joseph eased his chair forward, stood up, approached the car, his faded eyes squinted against the glare of the floodlights mounted on top of the high fence. The car looked like the one young Jeff Weedham drove. Jeff Weedham was "Old Bill" Weedham's son. He took no interest in his father's business or in anything else unless it was that newspaper business which the elder Weedham had purchased for him.

Yes, that was Jeff Weedham at the wheel, and beside him were two other young people – a girl and a redheaded man. Joseph took off his cap and a grin cracked his weathered face.

"Hi," Jeff Weedham said. He was a narrow-headed man with frail-looking sloped shoulders and a thin triangle of face. He had an engaging, careless grin, and light brown eyes that laughed. He had a marked tendency to stutter.

"Well," Joseph said, highly pleased, "if it ain't Mr. Jeff Weedham!"

Joseph sent a shy glance toward the other occupants of the car. The girl instantly reminded him of honey and violets. Hers was one of those clear, golden complexions, and there was a certain unspoiled sweetness about her mouth. It must have been her eyes that recalled violets.

The man on the girl's right seemed to overlap her possessively which could have been accounted for by the width of his shoulders. His red hair bristled in defiance to any comb. His nose looked as though it had been hit a few times in its owner's lifetime. The greenish suit he wore was filled to capacity with overly developed muscles. A leather cased camera was suspended from his bull neck by means of a strap. He had a flashlight gun in his right hand, and a photographer's tripod was propped upright between his knees.

"D-d-do you think you could let us in?" Jeff Weedham asked of Joseph. "*The D-Daily Opinion* is going to give D-d-dad a plug."

The Daily Opinion was the newspaper which Bill Weedham had bought for his son, Joseph recalled.

"Why, I guess so," Joseph replied. "But your friends here will have to sign the register book."

The big redhead had some difficulty getting into the pocket of his suit coat from which he extracted a card. He swelled importantly as he handed it across to the gate keeper. The card read, "*The Daily Opinion*. Joe Strong, News Photographer."

He said, "I guess this will fix everything, huh Jeff?"

"This is Miss Barbara Sutton," Jeff said, indicating the girl beside him. "I've hired her as a reporter, and Joe Strong is her cameraman. I just came along to see that they get inside. They're d-d-doing an article on the various manufacturing plants around New York."

Joseph bowed to Barbara Sutton. "You folks can go right in, just as soon as you sign the book." He went back to his post and returned with a ledger. He turned pages with a moistened thumb, took a pencil out of his pocket, passed both to the passengers of the roadster. Barbara Sutton and Joe Strong signed.

"Looks like it's kicking up a storm," Joseph said.

The thunder rolled ominous reply to his remark. Then Joseph went to the gate, opened it, and the roadster rolled up the drive toward the stamping mill.

Joseph went back to his chair and rekindled his pipe. He smiled at the memory of Barbara Sutton. He didn't know when he had seen a prettier girl. There must be an awful lot of young fellows who thought the same thing.

"And if I was twenty years younger I guess I'd try to give them a lot of competition!" he said aloud and chuckled.

His chuckle stopped as lightning flare threw the shadow of a man across the ground at Joseph's feet. He looked up, startled. The man faced Joseph silently. He was slight, wore a workman's overall suit, and he had a lunch box under his arm. His face, what could be seen of it beneath the low drawn hat, was one of starved cheeks, lipless mouth, pinched nose, and a chin that seemed to dangle.

Joseph at first thought the man was one of the mill hands who had arrived late for work.

"You don't care what time you show up," Joseph grumped. "You know you're over an hour late?"

The slight man laughed unpleasantly.

"I ain't late," he said. "I guess I'm just about in time."

Something with the glint of bright steel flashed from the lunch box under the man's arm. Instantly Joseph's mind connected this with the seventy-five thousand dollars in small bills that was to come in on the bank express truck in a few minutes.

Stick-up! Joseph's brain shrieked the alarm. He tried to get out of his chair, but a knife blade that was like a sliver of light was driven into Joseph's throat, sliding through flesh and muscle, torturing every pain nerve in his body, driving relentlessly until the point of it wedged into the wood back of the gate keeper's chair.

The chair creaked and groaned beneath Josephs' writhings. But the knife and the thin, dirty fingers of the killer did not permit his body to alter its position. And then the pain nerves died. Joseph's brain emptied, fortunately; a man would not want to know that he was tacked to a chair, bleeding to death.

The killer released Joseph. A little of the spurting blood had got on his dirty fingers, and he wiped his hands on the seat of his trousers. Then he removed the keys from the gate keeper's pocket. He went to the gate, unlocked it, and opened it wide.

There were great overgrown shrubs on either side of the gate just outside the factory grounds. The killer walked to the bushes at the west side of the gate, parted the branches with his dirty fingers.

"Delancy," his voice croaked.

The shrubbery shook. The thick torso of a man who squatted like a toad could be seen partly emerging from the shrubs.

"Okay, Shiv?"

"Okay, Delancy," the killer chuckled. "His own mudder would t'ink he was asleep in the chair. Don't death make a guy look natural, huh?"

"You get back to the car," the man in the bushes said. "Be ready to pick us up as soon as we crack the money truck. If you get nervous, think of the dough. Seventy-five grand!"

"I ain't noivous!" the killer said. "T'ink I never croaked a guy before. It's a pipe. Dis whole job is a pipe, wit' us havin' a Monitor gun to open dat armored truck. I'm almost ashamed to be associated wit' such a pipe of a job."

"Sure it's a pipe," Delancy agreed from amid the bushes. "Only don't get too cocky on account of there's one guy who could mess things up for us if he ever hits our trail."

Shiv laughed. "You're worrying about the Black Hood, huh?"

"I'm not worrying," Delancy said crossly. "I'm just being cautious. Each job we do for the boss gets a little bigger. One of these times we'll run into Mr. Black Hood."

"And when we do – " the killer drew a line across his throat with his forefinger. Then he turned and walked away from the bushes.

Delancy's moon face disappeared in the foliage. Only his hard little eyes glittered in the shadows. Beside him, patiently silent, was Squid Murphy. Murphy was motionless except for his twitching left eyelid. Murphy was manning the Colt Monitor rifle, the kind of gun the G-men used to death-drill the armor plate cars the mobsters sometimes used. Tonight the weapon was in other hands.

Delancy watched the lean figure of the knifeman ambling leisurely up the road toward where the get-away car was parked, lights out. Shiv wasn't nervous. Neither was Murphy, in spite of his twitching eyelid. There was nothing to be nervous about since they had hooked up with this new boss – this guy Delancy had never seen; this guy who knew all the answers. No, there was nothing to worry about as long as that relentless hunter of criminals known as the Black Hood kept off their tail.

Delancy wasn't nervous even when the blunt gray snout of the bank express truck turned into the mouth of the drive and slowed up before the open gate. He just took a firmer grip on his automatic and waited.

The driver of the bank truck yelled at the motionless figure of Joseph. And when Joseph didn't answer, the driver nudged the guard who rode beside him.

"What the hell's wrong with their watchman?"

Delancy heard that. His little eyes saw the guard get out of the cab. He saw that the back door of the armored truck was opening and another guard was getting out. Delancy thought, *What a break this is!* And then he shot the driver in the back.

The guard who had ridden up in front snatched at his shoulder holster as he turned in the direction of Delancy's fire. On the other side of the drive, two more of Delancy's boys opened up with automatics, so that by the time the guard had decided he was facing death, death spoke from behind him. Two slugs ripped into him. His own gun jumped twice, the first shot coming dangerously close to Delancy's head, while the second was an unaimed thing caused by the convulsive jerk of the guard's trigger finger as he spilled forward on his face.

The man who had got out of the rear of the truck saw a glimpse of the hell that had spouted from the shrubbery and tried to duck for cover behind the truck. And beside Delancy, the Monitor gun came to life. It talked fast in a language that was all its own. It got the retreating guard twice, the heavy, bone-shattering slugs knocking the man first one way and then another as he fell crazily to the ground.

There were two guards inside the truck. Their guns roared from the ports in the armored walls. But the Monitor rifle was a can opener. Crouching beside Squid Murphy, Delancy felt the heat of its barrel and saw the black periods that were bullet holes speckling the gray steel sides of the truck. Now only one of the gun ports in the truck was active.

The barrel of the Monitor swung and the hot steel barrel burned Delancy's arm. He said, "Hell!" hoarsely and jumped out of the bushes, automatic in hand. Delancy dropped flat and heard the sound

of a bullet whining by. And then the Monitor's deafening hammer sounded again, and after that, silence.

Delancy picked himself up, ran, his thick, toadlike body silhouetted by the truck lights. Gun smoke lay in placidly moving layers of gray before the light beams. Delancy ducked through the open door of the truck. One of his own men was already inside, and he tossed a money bag to Delancy. Delancy caught it with one arm and a belly and passed it back through the door to Squid Murphy who was standing just outside.

Delancy said, "Cut it, Murphy!" Because Squid Murphy was giggling. Murphy was kill-crazy, and tonight the Monitor rifle in his hands had made him feel like a god. His giggling rasped on Delancy's nerves.

Delancy picked up another money bag, and then told his boys they'd have to get going. He didn't know why he felt as though they ought to get away in a hurry. Surely no one inside the Weedham plant could have heard the gun fire above the racket the machines were making. Also, the neighborhood about the factory was thinly populated.

But something he couldn't put his finger on was spurring Delancy to get clear of the scene of the crime as soon as possible. Maybe it was the lightning that flashed with ever increasing frequency. Or maybe it was the ghastly tableau the body of Joseph, the watchman, made, sitting in that chair, pinned there like a butterfly by Shiv's knife.

A big gray sedan stood in the middle of the road, the motor idling. Shiv the knifeman slouched indolently behind the wheel. Murphy and the other two gunmen were already getting into the rear seat, and Delancy went cold with the sudden fear that his pals might run out on him. As fast as his short bowed legs would carry him, he ran to the car and piled in beside Shiv. The knifeman looked at Delancy and snickered.

"What's the rush, Delancy? You think Black Hood is on your tail?"

Delancy snarled, "Hell, no! But let's get going, huh?"

Now that Shiv had mentioned it, Delancy recognized the fear that plagued him. It was fear of the Black Hood. The Black Hood wasn't like the cops at all. He didn't trail a man with screaming sirens and blasting whistles. He hunted like a panther in the night, alone and silent. And you never knew just when the shadow of this master manhunter was to fall across your path.

CHAPTER II

Secret Traffic

If Delancy had stayed a little longer at the scene of his crime, he would have learned that his premonition was founded in truth. The Black Hood *was* hard on Delancy's heels that night. Advance notice of the stick-up at the Weedham plant had sifted up through the underworld grapevine to come eventually to Black Hood's ears. It had been very scanty information and late in its arrival – too late to enable the master manhunter to block the plan. All that Black Hood had learned was that robbery of the Weedham factory had been planned, which wasn't anything very definite considering that the Weedham Industries occupied over fifty acres of ground.

When all hell broke loose at the south gate of the factory, Black Hood was actually at the north-west corner of the grounds. A cat could scarcely have seen him, lurking in the shadows, his tall figure shrouded in a black silk cape, his head and face hidden by his famous hood. But his position did give him one advantage over those actually at work in the factory buildings – he could distinguish the rattle of gun fire from the racket made by the stamping mill.

At the sound of the first shot, Black Hood had climbed to the top of the high wire fence to leap into the factory grounds. Lightning had seen him streaking through the open areas between buildings – a weird figure in yellow tights, night-black shorts and hooded mask, his cape whipping out from his broad shoulders. He might have been mistaken for a man from Mars or a devil out of Hell, yet beneath the grotesque garb beat a heart that was warm and human.

Black Hood knew what it was to be a policeman with hands bound by red tape or political intrigue. He knew what it was to be a criminal, to be hunted as Delancy was hunted. Once he had been a young cop, determined to work his way up in the police force. One of the most diabolical fiends of the underworld had framed this cop for a crime. The frame had stuck. In his efforts to clear himself, the young cop had taken half a dozen lead slugs from underworld guns into his body. He had been left on a lonely mountain road, apparently dead, later to be found by that wise, gray-whiskered man known as the Hermit.

It was the Hermit's vast store of scientific knowledge that brought the half-dead cop back to health. It was the Hermit who gave the ex-cop a body with the strength of steel and a mind that was a veritable encyclopedia of scientific knowledge. It was the Hermit who had sent the ex-cop back into the world to live a useful life, to strike back at the denizens of the underworld who had harmed him.

So the Black Hood was born to live in two identities. By day he was a pleasant, mild-mannered young man known as Kip Burland to Barbara Sutton, Joe Strong, and others of their set. But at night Kip Burland became the Black Hood, man of mystery, hunter of killers. Police who did not understand the unorthodox methods of the Black Hood suspected him of numerous crimes. The underworld that feared him wanted him dead. He was the hunter hunted.

Once the secret of his dual identity became known, he knew that he faced either death from the hands of criminals or prison from the hands of police. Barbara Sutton, who merely tolerated Kip Burland, was deeply in love with the Black Hood, yet even Barbara did not know that Kip and the Black Hood were one and the same person.

Black Hood was not the only person at the Weedham plant who had heard the gun fire at the south gate. Joe Strong, newly appointed cameraman on Jeff Weedham's newspaper, had been standing at one of the doors of the stamping mill, smoking a cigarette when the hold-up had taken place. However, it required a few seconds for his dull brain to comprehend just what was taking place and from what direction the shots had come.

Joe Strong had been trying to develop a nose for news. When he finally realized what was going on at the south gate, he decided that here was a chance for some swell pictures that would prove to Jeff Weedham and Barbara Sutton that he was a natural born news hound. He ran from the stamping

mill, his camera bobbing from the strap around his neck and his tripod dragging behind him. He had heard that a crack news photographer could adjust a camera on the run and he figured that he could do that and also mount the camera on the tripod at the same time.

It was a very good idea except that like most of the ideas that sprouted slowly from Joe's brain, it didn't work. He was within fifteen yards of the scene of the crime when he tripped over one leg of his tripod and fell flat on his face.

When he picked himself up, he saw something that knocked all ideas of picture taking out of his thick skull. A brilliant blaze of lightning showed him the unmistakable figure of the Black Hood bending over the body of Joseph, the watchman. He saw Black Hood's gauntlet gloved hand closed on the handle of the knife that was thrust into Joseph's neck.

Joe Strong had met Black Hood many times before, and, like the police, Joe was convinced that Black Hood was a clever criminal. It occurred to Joe in the darkness that followed the lightning flash, that it was Black Hood who had stuck up the bank truck, slaughtered the guards, and was just now in the act of finishing off Joseph, the only remaining witness to his crime.

So natural was the position of old Joseph in his chair that Black Hood, too, had made the mistake of thinking that the watchman was alive. He had approached Joseph with the idea of learning something about the escaping criminals. He turned, now, from the murdered gate keeper to see Joe Strong bearing down upon him, fists balled, square teeth showing, his wide, coarse-featured face a mask of determination. He knew that Joe Strong, in spite of his clumsiness, could be a nasty opponent in a scrap.

Joe closed in fast, led with his left fist in a blow that began way down and ended exactly nowhere – nowhere, because Black Hood side-stepped both the haymaker and Joe Strong.

"Gangway, muscle man!" Black Hood's voice rang out, and then like a slim arrow unleashed from a taut drawn bow Black Hood sped up the tarvia drive toward where the low slung roadster that belonged to Jeff Weedham was parked.

Black Hood vaulted into the roadster without bothering to open the door. Jeff Weedham had left the key in the ignition lock. The black gauntlet covered fingers of the master manhunter gave the key a twist and at the same time he plugged in the starter button. The motor responded instantly. Black Hood brought the car around in a wide sweeping turn to head back toward the gate, had to swerve to avoid hitting Joe Strong.

There were some of the admirable qualities of the bull dog about Joe Strong. Once his one-track mind got to functioning on a certain objective it seldom digressed. And at the present moment his was determined to stop Black Hood. As the roadster passed, straightening out of its loop turn, Joe leaped to the running board, seized the wheel in one hand and tried to get Black Hood by the throat with the other. The car left the drive as Joe yanked at the wheel. It bounded toward a round bed of evergreens that beautified the factory grounds. Black Hood released the wheel, stood up on the pedals, and at the same time slammed Joe across the face with the back of his gauntlet covered left hand. The blow, the sudden stopping of the car, combined effectively to give Joe the shake. He went backwards, sailing through the air, to land in the evergreen bed.

Black Hood let the clutch slap in and the roadster bounded back onto the tarvia drive. Perhaps none but the steel-nerved Black Hood would have tried to get through that factory gate, partially blocked as it was by the crippled bank truck. But the master manhunter could have driven a gas truck through Hell's own fire. Instead of slowing the car to squeeze through the narrow opening, he tramped on the gas pedal and set his teeth for the shock he knew was coming. Because he knew that the space between truck and gate post was too narrow to allow the roadster to pass unscarred.

The right front fender hit the brick of the gate post. There was a scream of tortured metal as the fender was sheared from the body. The impact dragged down on the speed of the roadster so that the rear right fender was only crumpled by the brick work. But momentum was sufficient to carry Jeff Weedham's roadster out onto the road.

Black Hood knew that the criminals had taken the road toward town. As soon as he had reached the south gate he had ascertained this by a glance at the gravel shoulder of the road. Whoever had been driving the get-away car had started in a hurry so that one rear wheel threw gravel in the opposite direction of travel. Just how much of a lead the rob and kill men had on him, Black Hood did not know. But he did know that Jeff Weedham's car was a gallant piece of machinery, capable of tremendous speed and so nicely balanced that it could cling to sharp curves.

Actually, only a few seconds had elapsed between the time when Delancy and his killers had hit the road and the time when Black Hood had arrived at the south gate. The man called Shiv was driving Delancy's get-away car at a conservative pace so as not to excite suspicion. In this Shiv showed more wisdom than did Delancy.

"You think you're going to a funeral?" Delancy demanded when his patience could endure the pace no longer.

Shiv said, "But you'll be goin' to one if I open dis crate up. You want speed cops on your tail, Delancy?"

"To hell with the cops," Delancy snarled. "Step it up a little."

Shiv speeded up to forty miles an hour as he rolled to the top of a little hill. A mile or so distant the lights of one of New York's suburbs twinkled in the darkness.

"We got lots of time," Shiv said. "You're noivous, Delancy. You got ants. Up here at this next town we slide into a filling station and get us a new paint job and new plates, all in the space of ten minutes. Like I said before, dis job is a pipe."

Delancy didn't hear Shiv. He was twisted around in the front seat, looking over the heads of Squid Murphy and the two other gunsels in the back seat. Through the rear window, Delancy saw twin swords of light from the lamps of another car not so far behind them.

"We're tailed now," he said hoarsely.

"Aw nuts!" Murphy said from the back seat. "We ought to make you get out and walk. Every time you see a car behind you, you get the ants."

Delancy drew his tongue over dry lips. He said, "Take a look for yourself, Murphy. That guy behind is burning asphalt off the road."

Murphy and the other hoods looked backwards. The car behind was a roadster, they could see in a sudden splash of lightning. And it was traveling like the wind.

Delancy opened the glove compartment in the instrument board and took out a pair of field glasses. He got to his knees on the front seat, turned around so that he could sight out the back window. He tried to hold the speeding roadster in the range of the glasses, and when the lightning came again he thought he could make out the figure of the driver at the wheel. He thought that he saw a sleek rounded head closely covered by a black silk hood. He was almost certain that he saw a black silk cape whipping out from the shoulders of the lone man in the car.

Delancy got cold all over. He gripped Shiv's shoulder convulsively, nearly sending his own car into the ditch by so doing.

"Step on it, Shiv," he said hoarsely. "I don't like the looks of that guy in the car behind us."

"So you don't like the guy's hair-do!" Shiv sneered. "And I should kick the bottom out of dis crate just because you don't like the looks of somebody behind us!"

Delancy passed the glasses back to Squid Murphy.

"See what you see, Murphy," he said quietly. Then he turned around, hauled out his gun, and shoved it into Shiv's ribs. "When I said step on it, I wasn't fooling."

"Gees!" Murphy said. "That guy back there's got a hell of a thing on his head. Looks like a hood."

"A black hood," Delancy said. "And I don't think I want to have anything to do with that guy, do you, Shiv?"

Shiv came down on the gas pedal and the car picked up speed. He said, "All right, all right! I'm steppin' on it, ain't I?"

If Delancy's car hadn't speeded up, Black Hood in the car behind might not have taken particular notice of it. But that sudden spurt of speed on the part of the gray sedan was a dead give-away. Black Hood knew that he was hot on the trail.

The big gray sedan carrying Delancy and his pals, hit the suburban town at a scant seventy miles an hour. It ran by three red lights without shaking the roadster piloted by Black Hood. The streets were slippery with rain that was sheeting out of the black sky, and when Shiv tried to negotiate the next corner, the big sedan turned completely around.

Delancy thought then that the chase was over, but Shiv had a trick or two up his sleeve. He spurted, took the car half way down the block, heading in the very direction from which Black Hood was coming. Then Shiv whipped his wheel around for a short turn into the mouth of an alley.

Delancy breathed again. He could see where everything was going to be all right now. The gray sedan bounced over the rough alley pavement, cut across the street at the next block, and rolled onto the concrete area in front of a large gas service station. The overhead doors beneath a sign which advertised car washing by steam ran up on their track as the gray sedan came into sight. Shiv steered into the wash room, and the doors dropped back into place.

Delancy got out, his body bathed in a cold sweat. The proprietor of this gas station was in the employ of Delancy's boss who had planned every step of the stick-up at the Weedham plant and the subsequent get-away. Delancy had supreme faith in his boss. For the first time since he had sighted that strange figure in the roadster that had followed them, he began to feel a little bit secure.

Delancy entered the filling station office, followed by his mob. The proprietor, a huge bear of a man in brown coveralls, scowled at Delancy. He said:

"The way you came in here, it's a wonder you didn't bring a whole squad of cops with you. What's the matter, anyway?"

Delancy didn't answer just then. The proprietor of the station wasn't alone in his office. There was a dame. She was a tall, well-dressed woman with wax-pale skin and black hair that was parted in the middle and slicked back to a soft knot. She had peculiarly cold green eyes that were tilted at the outer extremities. Her lips were full, soft and brilliantly rouged.

Delancy jerked his head at the woman and asked of the proprietor: "Who's that, Burkey?"

Burkey shrugged big shoulders. "She's from the boss. She's got a message for you."

The woman was beautiful. But there was something about the chilly expression in her eyes that made Delancy feel decidedly uncomfortable. She did not smile as she opened a black purse and produced an envelope which she handed to Delancy.

While Burkey was opening the steam valves that would spray hot vapor on the car in the wash room, Delancy tore open the letter which the woman had handed him. Inside was a slip of paper on which had been typed the following:

"The bearer will ride with you into Manhattan."

There was no signature, but in its stead was the crude drawing of an eye, formed by two bowed lines that represented lids and two circles, one within the other, representing iris and pupil. Delancy knew that the message was from that man he had never seen – the big boss, the man who knew all the answers.

Delancy touched a match to the message. He looked at the woman with the cold green eyes.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

"I suppose," she said in a quiet voice, "that it will look less suspicious if you are seen driving a car with a woman beside you. Your men are to get into the baggage trunk at the rear or else crouch down on the floor of the rear compartment."

Delancy snorted. "That's nuts. There ain't any sense to this. It was a clean job. We didn't mix with any coppers."

"No?" she said, elevating her eyebrows. "Nevertheless, you will carry out the orders. The Eye knows what he's doing."

CHAPTER III

Haven Of The Hunted

Ten minutes later, Delancy drove the get-away car out of the service station. It was a gray sedan no longer. It was a brilliant blue job with red wheels, and it carried a Texas license. Delancy was at the wheel and the woman with the cold green eyes rode beside him. Two of Delancy's gunmen crouched out of sight on the floor of the rear compartment while two more had been crowded into the luggage compartment at the rear.

As the car rolled on toward Manhattan's northern boundary, the woman with the green eyes switched on the radio on the dash. All of the cars used on stick-up jobs were furnished with receivers capable of picking up police calls, and out of the corner of his eye, Delancy saw that the woman was twisting the dial down to the police band.

"What's the idea?" Delancy asked. He wasn't particularly pleasant to this woman who rode with him, largely because she treated him like the dirt under her feet.

"I simply want to check up," she said coldly. "I want to know just how clean that job was."

"Clean?" Delancy fumed. "Listen, lady, we knocked off every damned guy who could have told anything about us. And there wasn't a copper in sight. Why, I haven't seen a bull in so long I'd have to look twice to recognize one."

"That may be," she admitted, "but I want to make sure."

"Listen," Delancy said, now thoroughly angry, "how do you get that way? Who the hell are you, checking up on me? You the Eye's moll?"

"Moll?" questioned the woman. "I do not understand."

"You don't understand!" Delancy scoffed. "Listen, babe, don't get high-hat with me or I'll slap you down."

"You would not be so foolish," she said scornfully. "The Eye would tear you into small pieces. He would –"

The flat voice of a police announcer came from the radio speaker and interrupted the threat:

"Warning to all cars. Be on the lookout for blue Buick sedan, nineteen thirty-nine model, red wheels, being driven by Raymond Delancy. Delancy is wanted for hold-up and murder. Wanted for hold-up and murder, Ray Delancy, height five feet eight inches, weighing one hundred eighty pounds –"

Delancy's hand shot out to the radio switch, cutting off the voice of the announcer. It was impossible! There had been no police at the Weedham plant. No cops had tailed them. No cops had seen that the gray sedan which had driven into Burkey's filling station had come out a blue sedan.

"A clean job, you said?" the woman with the green eyes mocked.

One of the gunmen who crouched on the floor of the rear compartment cursed quietly and without interruption for nearly a minute. Delancy tramped nervously on the gas pedal.

"Don't worry, anybody," he said. "The heat's on, and I don't know how the hell the cops got that way, but it ain't the first time I've given them the shake. We'll go to Jack Carlson's garage. He'll get us out of this. It'll cost something, but hell, we've got lots of dough."

Delancy drove as though he was rolling on thin ice. The sight of a traffic cop made him dodge around a corner that threw him off his course. He came close to having convulsions when a squad car passed on the next street west, its siren wailing. He told the boys in the back seat to get their guns out, just in case they had to shoot it out. But somehow all of his anxiety was wasted, and he at last sighted a neon sign which read:

"ATLAS AUTO LIVERY"

Delancy turned the sedan through the door of the big garage, rolled across the wide parking floor to the cement ramp at the rear. He got into second gear and zoomed up the ramp to the second floor. Then he got out of the car, walked to the office which was partitioned off from the rest of the floor by means of frosted glass. The door of the office carried the words, "Jack Carlson, President."

Carlson had started out as the operator of a wildcat bus company. In this business he had learned so many ways to circumvent the law that he had decided to put that knowledge to more lucrative uses. Under the cover of a legitimate auto livery and trucking business, he had built a vast transportation system which was employed by any criminal who was wanted by the police and could afford to pay Carlson's fee. When the town got too hot for a killer or stick-up artist, Jack Carlson had many tricks up his sleeve which would enable the wanted man to move to a cooler spot.

Delancy entered Carlson's reception room which was never closed. At the invitation of the blonde stenographer at the desk, he squatted on a chair and lighted a cigarette. Jack Carlson entered the room a moment later, walking with the energetic bounce of a busy man.

Carlson was a little above medium height, dark complexioned, his brow a washboard of horizontal wrinkles. He had a waxed mustache which he was in the habit of twisting whenever in deep thought.

"Well, well, well," he said cheerfully as he shook hands with Delancy. "Some little trouble bothering you tonight, Ray?"

Delancy scowled. He couldn't see that there was anything to be cheerful about.

"The boys and I pulled a little job," he said. "It didn't amount to a whole lot, but I think there's a leak somewhere in our organization. The cops got the heat on us, and we'd like a hand out of town for a few days."

Carlson went to his desk, sat down, stuck a slim cigar in his well formed lips.

"How much was your job?" he asked quietly as he struck a match.

"Not much," Delancy said. "Maybe ten grand at the outside." He purposely lied about the take because Carlson usually charged on the percentage basis. Another thing which was inclined to influence Carlson's price was that little business of murder. If you killed on a job Carlson considered the danger greater and pushed up his fee accordingly.

"Anybody knocked off, Ray?" Jack Carlson asked.

Delancy squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. "One of the boys had to shoot a guard in the leg. Nothing messy, though."

Carlson inhaled deeply. A faint smile came to his lips. He removed his cigar and waved it at Delancy.

"So you got only ten grand, Ray? And nobody knocked off?"

"That's what I said," Delancy crabbed.

Carlson chuckled. "I happen to know that a number of men were killed, that you're wanted for murder, and that your total take was about seventy-five thousand dollars. And it'll cost you just thirty-two thousand five hundred dollars of that money to get you out of the jam."

"Thirty-two thousand – " Delancy gasped.

Carlson waved his cigar. "But for that price I'll see that you and all your boys get a nice cool spot to hideout in, somewhere a long way from New York."

Delancy stood up. "Why you damned greaseball, you! I'd see you in hell first. Pay fifty per cent of my take to you and the usual ten per cent to the Eye for his part of the job! Hell, that leaves me a lousy forty per cent without counting the split to the boys."

"Take it or leave it," Carlson shrugged.

"I'll leave it!" Delancy rapped. "Why, damn you, that's robbery!"

"And your crime was murder," Carlson said. He twisted his mustache thoughtfully. "I think you'll take my offer, Delancy, because there just isn't any other out for you."

Delancy's scowl deepened. His eyes narrowed. An idea was beginning to roll around inside his head. He didn't know exactly what he ought to do with it, but it was an idea, anyway.

He said, "You think there's no other out for me, huh? Well, I'll make an out before I'll pay any such figure to you. And listen, fellah, if I thought – " He stopped a moment, dropped his cigarette onto the carpet and heeled it out. "Well anyway, Carlson, I'm going to have a little talk with the Eye. And that little talk is going to be about you and the rotten deal you tried to hand me."

"Go ahead and talk," Carlson said. "And when the cops start closing in on you and your mob, let me know. I'll get you out of the jam for the same figure."

Carlson got up, walked around his desk to where Delancy stood in front of the door. He stuck out his hand.

"No hard feelings, Ray?"

Delancy looked down at the hand and sneered.

"No hard feelings, chiseler, but I sure would like to put a couple of slugs in your belly!" And Delancy swaggered out of the office. He guessed he'd told that chiseler where he got off.

As soon as the door had closed, Jack Carlson bounded back to his desk, touched a button on an inter-office communications box. Somebody on the lower floor of the garage answered.

Carlson said, "Ray Delancy is just leaving. I want him tailed."

CHAPTER IV

Live Steam

The Black Hood had reached a dead-end in the trail which had led him from the Weedham Industries plant. The gray sedan in which the fleeing criminals were riding had vanished, apparently into thin air. Black Hood had spent thirty minutes of search at break-neck speed in an attempt to pick up the trail of the gray sedan again. He had driven the roadster which belonged to Jeff Weedham in and out of alleys in a trial and error effort to sight the killers' car, but all without success.

It occurred to him then that it was entirely possible that the rob and kill boys had not left the suburban town at all. Perhaps this was their hideout. With that in mind, he parked Jeff Weedham's car and stepped out into the rain, his black cape wrapped around him. He felt that he could walk the streets in comparative safety in spite of his costume, for it would have required close inspection under direct light to distinguish the garb he wore from the standard poncho and rain-hood worn by the traffic police in bad weather.

After an hour or more of leg work that yielded him no information so far as a possible hideout for the criminals was concerned, Black Hood came across the drunk. The drunk was in a dismal alley, leaning up against the wall of a tavern which he had evidently just left. He was a young man, and he wore some sort of a uniform – that of a chauffeur, taxi driver, or something of the sort. When Black Hood put in his appearance, the young man started to move along up the alley, staggering as he walked.

"Wait a minute," Black Hood called.

"S all right, officer," the drunk said, mistaking Black Hood for a cop. "I'm on my way. I'm goin' home."

"You think you'll get there, weaving around that way?" Black Hood asked, catching up with the man. "If you don't fall asleep under the wheels of a truck you'll be mighty lucky."

"Only live a block from here," the drunk explained. "I'll make it. I gotta skin full, all right. Never been drunk before, so help me, officer. But Burkey fired me because he said I was drunk when I wasn't. A man's gotta live up to his reputation, don't he?"

"Who's Burkey?" Black Hood asked. He was determined to see that the young drunk got safely home.

"Runs the Super-Charged Gasoline Station two blocks south of here. He said he wouldn't have a drunk working for him, but I was cold sober when it happened."

"When what happened?" Black Hood linked his arm with that of the young man.

"I was out at the gas pumps when a gray sedan barreled into the station and in onto the wash rack," the young man explained. "Burkey brought the doors down in the wash room and turned on the steam. About ten minutes later, the gray sedan drove out the other side of the wash room, and it wasn't gray any more. It was blue – blue with red wheels."

At the mention of a gray sedan traveling fast, Black Hood's interest increased.

"Maybe," he suggested, "there were two cars in the wash room."

"Can't be," the young man said. "There's only room for one at a time. I went to Burkey and asked him how it happened that a car would change color like that. He said it hadn't changed color and if I thought it had I must be drunk. So he fired me. But I was cold sober, I tell you. And I'd like to know what I'm going to do and what my widowed mother is going to do with me out of a job."

Black Hood reached inside his cape. The broad black belt which he wore contained many secret pockets, and from one of these he extracted a ten-dollar bill. He pressed the money into the young man's hand.

"That'll tide you over until you can find a job," he said. "Think you can get across the street all right?"

They had reached the end of the alley by this time, and the young drunk had said that his home was just on the other side of the street. The drunk stared at the crumpled bill in his hand. Then he raised his eyes to Black Hood's face. In the glow from a nearby street lamp he could clearly see the black mask that covered the upper part of Black Hood's face to the tip of his nose. The drunk was startled.

"Who – who are you?" he stammered.

Black Hood laughed. "Never mind, son. Just forget you ever saw me." Then he turned and ran back along the alley to walk quickly in the direction of the gas station where the drunk had worked, two blocks to the south.

The overhead door of the car washing room was open, and as Black Hood entered it he glanced through the glass pane of the door connecting this portion of the service station with the office. A big, shaggy-haired man in brown overalls had just picked up the telephone from his battered, grease-stained desk. This man would be Burkey, the owner of the station.

Black Hood's keen eyes flicked around the room in which he now stood. At the back, near a stand that racked a number of grease guns, he saw a second telephone fixed to the wall. An extension of the one in the office, he wondered?

He crossed to the wall phone and gently removed the receiver from its hook and held it to his ear. He heard a gruff voice which might well have been that of the man Burkey, say: "Is this the Eye?"

Black Hood's eyes narrowed. The voice that came back over the wire was a toneless whisper.

"This is the Eye speaking."

Burkey said, "Delancy came through here about a couple of hours ago."

"Delancy?" the Eye said. "Yes, I know."

"I changed paint jobs for him according to instructions," Burkey explained. "But what I called you about, I got a young fellow working here, grinding gas. He saw the gray sedan roll in here and he saw that it was blue when it went out. He came to me to ask how come."

"What did you do?" the Eye whispered.

"Told him he was drunk and fired him," Burkey replied.

"That was careless of you," the voice whispered after the pause of a moment. "Very careless. You should have silenced this man at once."

Burkey said, "How the hell could I do that?"

"That is your problem," the whisperer said. "But you must dispose of him immediately, do you understand?"

"Is that an order?"

"That is an order," the Eye whispered grimly, and broke the connection.

Black Hood hung up quietly. Then crouching low, he crossed the room to where the strainer top of the sewer drain was placed in the concrete floor. It was in this room that Delancy's get-away car had changed paint jobs, and in about ten minutes. How was such a thing possible?

He dropped to his knees, nerves tense as he lifted the strainer plate. Dove gray particles clung to the sewer opening beneath – particles of some sort of paint that was soluble in water or perhaps live steam. A glint of understanding came into his eyes. Delancy had driven the get-away car into this room. The car actually was not a gray car at all. It was a blue car, the paint covered with this gray, steam soluble substance. All that was necessary to convert the car which Black Hood had been following into a blue car which he certainly would have missed was a good bath of steam. It wouldn't have required more than ten minutes at the outside.

A rumbling sound that did not originate in the thunder caps above jerked Black Hood's attention from the drain. His glance darted toward the overhead doors which were dropping swiftly into place. His eyes turned toward the door leading into the service station office. Burkey, the proprietor, was standing at the door, watching Black Hood through the glass. There was a diabolical grin on the face of the station owner.

Black Hood straightened as the overhead doors fell into place and locked. He took two long, springy strides toward the door. But he never quite reached that door. With an explosive hiss, gray jets of live steam erupted from pipes around the edge of the room. Scalding steam that could burn and blister and boil human flesh.

Black Hood fell back from the door, staggered by his first contact with that hissing gray hell. He threw back his head, looked above at steam pipes that criss-crossed overhead. And then Burkey manipulated the valve that controlled the overhead pipes, and the steam poured down upon Black Hood from above.

He couldn't see now, because of the steam. He dared not open his eyes lest the heat blind him permanently. But in that brief glimpse upward, Black Hood had marked the location of one of the steam pipes. He crouched, nerves and muscles tense, controlled in spite of the torturous cloud of scalding vapor that pressed close to him. Suddenly, he unleashed all the pent-up power of flexed legs, leaped into the air, one gauntlet protected hand out-thrust for the pipe which he knew was there even if he could not see it. Fingers grasped, held like steel hooks. He drew himself up with one powerful arm until his other hand could join its mate.

The intense heat penetrated the leather palms of his black gauntlets. Still he hung on, drawing himself upward to hook a leg over the very pipe that threatened to boil him alive. He understood now why the Hermit, that wise old man who had nursed him from the very jaws of death, had been so insistent upon regular muscular exercise. The power to save himself was there in the muscles of back, legs and arms. It was there, waiting for just such moments of danger as these.

Gradually, he hauled himself to the pipe above, got his feet onto the pipe and stood erect, his hands reaching up to the rafters to maintain his balance. And there he waited in that hot gray cloud that pressed to the roof where it condensed and fell like warm rain. His body was safe from direct contact with the blistering jets of steam.

At last the steam was shut off, the gray clouds dissipated. Cautiously, Burkey unlocked the door which connected the car washing room with his office. He stepped out, doubtless expecting to find Black Hood curled up on the floor, all consciousness driven from him by the pain of countless steam burns. The Black Hood, watching from the pipes above, showed white teeth in a wide grin.

"Look up, Burkey!" he sang out.

And as the big service station proprietor raised startled eyes, the Black Hood let go of the rafters, took a dive from the pipe straight at the man below. He caught Burkey at the throat and shoulders with his hands. The driving weight of him crushed the big man to the floor, knocked the breath out of him. And for a moment Black Hood just sat there on top of Burkey, holding him in his powerful grasp.

"How does it feel to be utterly helpless, Burkey?" he said quietly. "You see what I can do with you? I can choke the life out of you this way." The fingers of his right hand constricted on Burkey's throat until the man's eyes crawled a little way out of their sockets. Then he eased his grip a little.

"Or I could dash your brains out against the floor like this."

And Black Hood seized Burkey's shaggy hair and bounced the filling station operator's head against the floor a couple of times.

Burkey said nothing. Black Hood slapped him hard across the side of the face with his gauntlet covered hand. Burkey winced, squirmed a little. Then realizing that he was completely at the Black Hood's mercy, he lay still.

"Talk!" Black Hood said. "Who is the Eye?"

"I don't know," Burkey croaked. "I've never seen him. I don't know who he is. You could kill me maybe, but you couldn't make me talk."

"What was that telephone number you just called?" Black Hood persisted.

Burkey's eyes rolled. "I can't tell you. The Eye would kill me if I told."

Black Hood laughed harshly. "And what do you think I'm going to do if you *don't* talk?"

Burkey said nothing.

Black Hood got off the man, stood up. He told Burkey to get to his feet.

"And you'd better get your fists up, Burkey, because if you don't I'm liable to knock your head off."

Possibly Burkey knew something about boxing. Possibly he had gone a round or two with some second rate slugger some time in his life. But certainly he had never fought with anybody who could equal the Black Hood in speed and fire power. Black Hood's fists were everywhere at once. His long arms were like rapiers, striking through Burkey's guard to land time after time in the big man's face.

Finally, Burkey crumpled against the wall, one eye closed, the other looking sleepy. Blood was dripping from nose and mouth.

"Talk!" Black Hood demanded, one closed fist raised like a hammer above the man's head.

Burkey simply shook his head feebly and collapsed, unconscious.

Black Hood made a swift but careful search of the filling station office without revealing anything in the way of incriminating evidence. If Burkey knew the Eye's telephone number he apparently kept it in his head.

Black Hood found a short length of chain and a padlock which was used to keep anyone from tampering with one of the oil pumps that topped a steel drum. He returned to the car washing room, scooped the keys out of the unconscious Burkey's pockets. Then he chained and locked the filling station man to the steel cross member of the wash rack. Then he went into the office, telephoned police headquarters. When the desk sergeant had answered, he said:

"If you will send men to the Super-Charged Gas station here in your city, you will find the proprietor, a man named Burkey. I suggest that he be questioned in conjunction with the activities of the criminal organizer known as the Eye, and especially in his connection with the killing and robbery at the Weedham Industries plant tonight."

"Who is this?" the desk sergeant demanded.

Black Hood chuckled. "You'll never find out!" And then he hung up, left the station to vanish into the murk of the rain swept night.

It must have been at about this time that Joe Strong, that demon photographer on the staff of Jeff Weedham's paper, *The Daily Opinion*, made a startling discovery. He was in the dark room at the newspaper office with Barbara Sutton, developing films which he had exposed at the Weedham factory that night.

He turned from his developing traps to face Barbara. The broad grin on his coarse features was illuminated by the ruby light hanging above their heads.

"Honey," Joe said, "I got something that's going to set little old New York right back on its heels. I've got positive proof that will identify the dirty bum who's behind this crime wave. Positive evidence that will point to the killer of that watchman at the Weedham plant tonight."

There was a skeptical gleam in Barbara's beautiful eyes. Since she had been working on the newspaper with Joe Strong assigned as her pix man, she had heard just such claims from Joe before. He was always turning up a picture that was to be the scoop of the week and which usually developed into a fogged film of no use to anybody.

She said, "Well, if you have you'd better turn it over to the editor before you bungle the developing some way. Jeff Weedham is going to have to pull something pretty soon to pick up circulation. He's got to prove to his father that he can run this business. If he fails at this job as he has at every other, I understand Mr. Weedham is going to cut Jeff off from the Weedham fortune."

Joe stuck his thumbs in the arm holes of his vest.

"Jeff's worries are over, permanently. This is the scoop of the week. We got the guy red handed. Take a look, beautiful."

Joe held up the negative strip which he had just developed. He pointed a thick forefinger at the exposure near the end of the strip. Joe didn't quite understand how he had got the picture unless that

flare of lightning had acted as a flashlight bulb and the lens of his camera had been open at the time. But no matter how he had obtained it, there was the picture.

It showed the unmistakable figure of Black Hood standing over Joseph, the Weedham gate keeper. It showed more than that. It showed Black Hood's gauntlet covered right hand grasping the knife that was plunged into Joseph's throat.

Barbara raised her hand to her mouth to check a startled cry. She stared at the negative and repeatedly shook her head.

"I don't believe it," she whispered. "He wouldn't do such a thing. It's a trick, Joe. You're trying to trick me."

"Not me," Joe said. "Just because you're in love with Black Hood you're trying to kid yourself. I always said that guy was a crook. And now there's proof. He's the Eye. He's the brains behind all this robbery and murder that resulted in looted banks and jewelry stores. The camera don't lie, Babs. And this little picture catches Mr. Hood with the goods on him."

Barbara's indrawn breath sounded like a sob. She turned quickly and ran from the dark room. Was it true? Could it possibly be true? Black Hood had always told her that he was an outlaw, and she had loved him in spite of that because of the many good and brave things he had done to defend people against the criminals of the underworld.

But if Black Hood *was* guiltless – this had never occurred to Barbara before – if he was actually guiltless, why had he never let her see his face?

CHAPTER V

The Brand Of Light

But Barbara Sutton *had* seen the face of the Black Hood. She saw it on the following night when a group of wealthy and influential citizens met at Gracelawn, the West End Avenue estate of William Weedham. Barbara saw Black Hood's face without knowing it, for in the identity of Kip Burland he had been with her all evening.

It was a pleasant face, sun-bronzed and well-formed, with waving brown hair and eyes that could be gentle and compassionate. Kip Burland had taken Barbara to dinner, much to the annoyance of Joe Strong, and later in the evening they had picked up Joe and driven in Barbara's car to the Weedham home.

Barbara was obviously deeply concerned over the evidence which Joe Strong had accidentally turned up. The picture of Black Hood in the apparent act of thrusting a knife into the throat of the Weedham Industries watchman, had been plastered all over the front page of Jeff Weedham's *Daily Opinion*. Other newspapers had taken up the cry, demanding that the Black Hood be taken dead or alive.

When Barbara mentioned this news story to Kip Burland, Kip scarcely knew what was the wisest course to pursue. If he defended the Black Hood he ran the risk of exciting suspicion. The secret that Kip Burland and the Black Hood were one and the same persons was more precious than ever, now that Black Hood was wanted for murder.

"There's just one thing, Babs," he told the girl as they drove to the Weedham home, "nobody can tell me that Black Hood and this criminal genius known as the Eye are the same. I can't believe it."

"Listen, Burland," Joe Strong put in angrily, "you're not sitting there and calling me a liar, either. All these stick-up jobs recently have been planned by the Eye. You'll agree to that, no doubt. That one last night at the Weedham works was the same sort of a thing – every possible witness murdered. And I not only saw the Black Hood with my own eyes, but I took a picture of him. And then he and I had a little scrap."

"How does it happen the Black Hood isn't right down in Tombs prison now?" Kip Burland asked mildly.

"Well, er," Joe stammered, "some of his men pitched in on me from behind. There must have been three of them, anyway."

Burland could scarcely repress a laugh.

"Only three? Why, you're slipping, aren't you, Joe?"

The bickering might have gone on the rest of the evening except that Barbara Sutton told them they were both being very foolish. If Kip didn't stop his arguing, she wouldn't vouch for him at this meeting tonight at the Weedham home. She and Joe were to cover the meeting for *The Daily Opinion*, but she had simply brought Kip along as a friend, trusting that that would be enough to get him in.

Barbara Sutton's name was a prominent one in social circles as was that of Joe Strong, so that there was no difficulty gaining admittance into the Weedham home for Kip Burland. In the magnificent reception hall, Kip was introduced to Jeff Weedham. The lanky heir to the Weedham wealth was cordial.

"D-d-don't see why you want to sit in on a stuffy meeting like this just for pleasure," Jeff Weedham said, smiling, "but I can assure you that any friend of Barbara's is a friend of mine."

The tall oak door of the library was opened by William Weedham himself – a plump, white-haired man with black, overhanging eyebrows.

"Son," he said to Jeff, "we're all ready to begin. As the owner of a newspaper which is instrumental in molding public opinion, you ought to welcome this opportunity to serve your community."

Jeff Weedham laughed. "Since the Eye or the Black Hood, whatever his name is, swiped my roadster, d-d-don't you think I'm not interested in laying him by the heels, D-d-dad."

William Weedham brought scowling eyes to focus upon Kip Burland.

"I don't believe I know this young man," he said.

Jeff said, "This is Kip Burland, a friend of mine, D-d-dad. He wants a try-out as a reporter. And I thought I'd let him help cover this business together with Joe and Barbara."

And that fixed it up. With a whispered warning to Kip to try and look like a would-be reporter, Jeff Weedham led Burland into the library. The elder Weedham took his place at the head of a long refectory table about which were seated six men. Some of those included in the committee which had been formed to take protective measures against the master criminal known as the Eye, were familiar to Kip Burland. There was short, beefy Sergeant McGinty, a representative from the police who was to serve as coordinator. McGinty, Kip Burland knew well enough, was the most ardent enemy of the Black Hood on the police force.

Then there was a cocky little man with sandy hair and one glass eye. He was Major Paxton, a retired army man and brother-in-law of William Weedham. Paxton made his home at the Weedham estate and quite naturally had been included in the group.

The tall, grim man with the long side whiskers was Harold Adler, an executive of the Bankers Express service. Certainly he had a grievance against the Eye after that attack on his guards and armored truck at the Weedham plant on the night before.

Kip Burland also recognized the handsome, energetic man with the sleek black hair and small, waxed mustache. This was Jack Carlson who operated the Atlas Auto Livery and some sort of a trucking concern. Just exactly why Carlson should have been called into this group, Kip did not know. He knew something of Carlson's past, perhaps more than even Sergeant McGinty did, and there were some blotches of shadow on Mr. Carlson's life story.

William Weedham rapped the meeting to order, remarked briefly that they had come here tonight to see if some definite plan could not be formed to cope with the ever rising danger of a major crime wave, planned and directed by this man who called himself the Eye.

"We are fortunate," the elder Weedham said, "in having Mr. Carlson with us tonight. It has been frequently said by the police that if taxi companies and other common carriers would cooperate with the law more closely, there would be much less chance for the criminal to escape. Mr. Carlson has a message for us which I hope will be representative of all members of all taxi and transport systems."

"It seems to me," Major Paxton put in, his small body swelling with importance, "that the crux of the whole matter lies in the fact that these criminals, who are operating under the direction of the Eye, have discovered some fool proof means of escaping from the scene of their crime. Is that correct, Sergeant McGinty?"

McGinty's face reddened. "I don't know whether you'd call it the crux or not, Major, but in any crime if a criminal has some fool proof means of escape, as you put it, there isn't a whole lot the police can do about it."

Somebody snickered. It was obvious that Major Paxton's remark hadn't been a particularly bright one.

"But I'll say this," the sergeant went on, "this fellow the Eye, and I prefer to call him the Black Hood, has developed a means of moving criminals beyond our reach to a hell of a high point." The sergeant coughed and apologized for his bit of profanity. "I mean, he's got a hole in the police dragnet big enough so you could drive a whole mechanized division of the army through it. If Jack Carlson can throw any light on the matter, I'd like to hear him do it."

Jack Carlson stood up, smiled smoothly, and bobbed his head to Sergeant McGinty.

"I think, gentlemen," he began, "that you will find few taxi operators in the city of New York who would not gladly assist in halting an escaping criminal if they were given the opportunity. And the same goes for any other common carrier – the railroads, bus service, and airlines. At the same

time, common carriers are obliged by law not to discriminate against a prospective passenger just because he may look suspicious: That is, if I am driving a cab and a man rushes out of a bank with what I may interpret as a look of guilt upon his face, I cannot refuse to take him as a fare. Nor can I very well ask for his finger prints and check up to see if he has a criminal record before taking him to his destination."

"We know all that, Carlson," Harold Adler said. "Suppose you tell these men what you told me before the meeting."

Carlson frowned, remained dramatically silent for a moment while he twisted his mustache. Kip Burland watched the man closely. If this was acting, Carlson was a remarkable actor. Somehow, he could not trust the man nor the words that came from his mouth.

Carlson said, "The Eye has not only organized the various mobs of gunmen in this city, but he has accomplished something else. He has established a perfect underground railway for transporting these criminals from one place to another in secret. I know, because the Eye personally asked me to handle that part of his business for him."

There was another dramatic pause. Then Sergeant McGinty sprang to his feet.

"Say, Mr. Carlson, if the Eye approached you personally let's have it right now. Is the Eye this same guy known as the Black Hood?"

Carlson smiled. "It would seem so from the picture which appeared this morning in the Daily Opinion."

"Yeah," Joe Strong put in. "That's the picture I took."

No one was paying any attention to Joe. All eyes were focused upon Jack Carlson.

"Understand," Carlson continued, "I did not meet the Eye face to face. He called me on the telephone, spoke to me in a whispering voice. He asked me if I would be interested in a money-making proposition. I played him along, tried to draw him out. He wanted me to employ cars and trucks for the secret transportation of criminals and in exchange I was to get a cut of the money which would be looted by his criminals."

"And," Weedham said, "you believe that some transportation company in this city is actually assisting the Eye in this business?"

"Undoubtedly," Carlson said. "I, of course, rejected his offer. I was attempting to figure out a plan by which I might trace this call to the Eye's hideout, but that's quite difficult with these dial phones, you know."

"But that is how the Eye is working his get-aways. He probably has carefully placed stations all over the city where criminals who are fleeing from some crime can get a fast car, or hide in some unsuspecting looking truck to be transported beyond the reach of the law. It would appear to me – "

Every light in the big room suddenly went out. Smothering blackness dropped like a shroud over those at the refectory table and upon Barbara Sutton, Joe Strong, Kip Burland, and Jeff Weedham who were seated along one wall.

"D-d-damn!" Jeff Weedham stuttered. "What's this – the well known blackout?"

A white beam of light stabbed through the French windows at the end of the room, spotted the wall directly above Jack Carlson's sleek head. In the center of the spot was a crude sign, projected in black lines upon the wall. It was like a child's drawing of a human eye, round, staring, and at the same time infinitely menacing.

Kip Burland was on his feet while the others remained spellbound by the brand of light. Watching the projected sign of the eye upon the wall, he nevertheless moved swiftly and silently toward the French windows.

The sign of the Eye flicked out, and in its place was a message in black letters:

CARLSON HAS DEFIED ME

HE WILL DIE

Burland waited for no more, but slipped through the French windows and onto the terrace. The white beam of light rayed out from a thick grove of shrubs and small trees on the other side of the big yard. Kip Burland raced across the lawn toward the source of the light.

CHAPTER VI

The Lady In White

Half way toward the thicket, Kip Burland saw that the light had gone out. But he had marked the spot from which it had originated, and in another moment he had broken through the tangled branches of the shrubs to the place from which the light ray had come. He saw no one. He stopped, listening. On his left he heard the crackling of twigs. He moved quickly in that direction, saw now a wraithlike figure in white.

"Hello there."

It was the soft voice of a woman who called. Kip Burland took a few more cautious steps in the direction of the figure in white. Now that his eyes were more used to the gloom, he could see that the woman was not alone. There was a man standing beside her.

"Hello," Kip responded calmly. He took a box of matches from his pocket, struck one, and held it high. The woman wore a white evening gown. Her beautifully molded face was nearly as white as her dress. Her hair was black as India ink, drawn back from her rounded forehead to knot softly at the back of her head. Her eyes were cool green with an exotic lift at the outer extremities of the lids.

The man beside her was evidently her chauffeur, judging from his uniform. He was a dark, somber looking man with a particularly ugly scar on his chin.

The woman smiled – a smile that did not quite reach her green eyes.

"Are you the man with the flashlight who was out here a moment ago?" she asked.

Kip's eyes narrowed. He wondered if the woman was beating him to the draw. He might have asked her, and with better reason, if it was she who had turned that beam of light on the Weedham house.

The match burned out in Kip's fingers. He tossed the stub of it aside.

"Obviously I'm not the man with the flashlight," he said evenly, "or I would not have had to light a match just now."

"How silly of me," the woman with the green eyes laughed. "Of course you are not. But I am so anxious to find my little locket. I am Vida Gervais, and I live just over the wall in the next house. I think I lost my little locket while walking here this afternoon. I hoped that you were the man with the flashlight and could help me find it."

"Don't you find that gown something of a liability hunting in this jungle?" Kip asked. Her explanation was entirely too glib to suit him.

But before she could form an answer, the whip-crack of a shot rang out from the direction of the Weedham house. The woman who had introduced herself as Vida Gervais uttered a short, sharp cry. Then she and her chauffeur turned and fled.

Kip Burland thrashed his way through the bushes to the border of the thicket. In the dim night glow, he saw a man running toward the house and a second figure that lay huddled on the lawn in front of the terrace steps. Burland could not be absolutely certain, but he thought that the running man was Jack Carlson. There were hoarse shouts from the immediate vicinity of the house, and Kip recognized the bellow of Joe Strong and the harsh rasping voice of Sergeant McGinty.

Kip broke away from the shrubbery and ran across the open lawn toward that point where the man lay on the ground. The second figure, which he thought was Jack Carlson, was now kneeling beside the fallen man.

In another moment, Kip saw that his first impression had been correct. The second man was Carlson. He looked up at Kip, his face chalk white in the uncertain light.

"He's dead," Carlson said. "He's been shot."

Burland dropped beside Jack Carlson, brought out his matches, struck one. The man on the ground was wearing an ordinary business suit. He was entirely bald, with a large, shapeless nose and

chubby cheeks. He was lying on one side, his left arm extended. Clutched in the dead fingers of his left hand was a yellow slip of paper. It looked like bank check paper to Burland.

Others were coming from around the side of the house – Jeff Weedham and Barbara Sutton. Behind them came Major Paxton and two other members of the committee.

Kip Burland shot a glance at Jack Carlson, saw that the latter was looking in the direction of the newcomers. Kip thrust out a hand toward the piece of yellow paper in the fingers of the corpse. It was so rapid a movement that even if Carlson had been watching him it is doubtful if the auto livery operator could have caught it. Kip jerked the piece of paper from the hand of the dead man, and stood up.

By the time Barbara and Jeff Weedham had joined them, Burland had rolled the slip of yellow paper into a cylinder and placed it inside the cap of his fountain pen.

"Kip!" Barbara gasped. "What's happened?"

"Someone seems to have been shot," he replied mildly. "I don't know just who."

Jeff Weedham had a flashlight. He turned the beam on the face of the dead man.

"D-d-damn!" he stammered. "It's Biggert. Poor old Biggert. Why, he's D-d-dad's private secretary. Attended to everything for D-d-dad."

William Weedham, Adler, and the rest of the committee men hurried from the corner of the house.

"Biggert, did you say?" William Weedham gasped. "Good lord! Where's that Sergeant McGinty?" And then Weedham dropped beside the dead man, looked long and searchingly into the immobile face.

Sergeant McGinty put in his appearance a moment later and with him was Joe Strong. He was holding onto Joe by the ear.

"Try your football tackles on me, will you!" McGinty was growling, while Joe was trying to break away without losing an ear.

"Aw, Sergeant, how did I know it was you prowling around in all that dark?" Joe complained.

It was evident that Joe had made another of his unfortunate mistakes. But McGinty forgot and forgave when he saw the body of Biggert lying there on the lawn. The sergeant bent his thick knees, took Jeff Weedham's flashlight, turned it on the corpse.

"It was obviously a mistake," Jack Carlson was explaining smoothly. "The killer had no designs on Biggert, certainly."

"Huh?" McGinty looked up, his red face contorted by a puzzled frown. "What do you mean, it was a mistake?"

"This is obviously the Eye's work," Carlson explained. "I was standing just about in this spot when this man Biggert came running around the house and directly in front of me. That was when the shot was fired. The bullet was intended for me. You would expect as much after the Eye's warning."

McGinty nodded his head. "Could be. And believe me, Mr. Carlson, you'd better put yourself under police protection."

"I can take care of myself, thanks," Carlson insisted. As he turned away from McGinty and the body, his eyes met those of Kip Burland. And then Carlson stepped quickly to the outer rim of the circle around the body.

Kip Burland knew that Carlson was lying. Carlson hadn't been near Biggert at the time of the shooting. It was Carlson whom Burland had seen running toward the body.

"D-d-dad," Jeff Weedham stammered, "where was Biggert when we were in the library?"

"Oh, how should I know!" The elder Weedham ran his fingers through his gray hair. "I don't know where he was. In his room, I suppose, going over my personal accounts."

"Possibly," Major Paxton put in, "he was disturbed when the lights went out in the house and came down to investigate. He probably heard the rest of us outside the house, searching for that prowler who turned the light through the library window."

"And possibly," McGinty said, "Biggert had discovered something pretty important, too! There's a little scrap of yellow paper in his fingers – just a corner, as though somebody snatched a note or something from his hand."

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